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Peter Ghosh, Max Weber and the Protestant Ethic. Twin Histories (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 978-0-19-870252-8

In this stunning work of intellectual archaeology, Peter Ghosh presents a new reading of Weber's thought through the vanishing point of the *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905) [PE]. Some might say that *Economy and Society*, which Marianne Weber posthumously assembled in 1920, as well as his late essays in global intellectual history, superseded the *PE* in terms of intellectual significance. But Ghosh insists that Weber never lost sight of his central preoccupation with capitalism and the history of the West, even when dealing with subjects such as Hinduism and Confucianism.

The text of the PE itself is flanked by two large silences: a nervous collapse, which hit Weber in 1898; and the First World War, during which Weber was engaged in some war work, journalism, and the writing of essays. Observing that '[t] he most important guide to the tendency of Weber's thought' can sometimes be 'not a statement but a silence' (141), Ghosh brazenly cuts into it, as if silence itself could be broken down into discrete speech acts, should Ockham demand it. One of the key ideas to which Weber became attuned in the *PE,* but which were only fully articulated later, was his distinction between ancient capitalism, which relies on slave labour, and modern capitalism, which is based on certain internalised habits drawn from Protestant sectarianism. Through conceptual innovation such as the coinage of a term like *Täufer* (would Baptizers be the right English translation?), Ghosh argues, Weber discovered a unity in previously disconnected phenomena. This allowed him to see the peculiar rationality of modern capitalism as a gradual and historically unique process, rather than a system that could be transplanted or reproduced ad libitum. Weber found histories of Protestantism in studies of ancient Judaism, in Jesuit libraries as well as those of nervous sanatoria, and in his reading of Georg Jellinek's *The Declaration of the Rights of Men and of Citizens* (p. 32). This picture of globally connected Protestant religious communities revealed behavioural patterns, which give social relations and political institutions of the modern West their distinctive character. Learning from Weber's own philology, Ghosh insists on rendering *Entzauberung* as 'demagification', a term which draws attention to the magician of the kind Marx discusses in 'commodity fetishism' rather than Adam Smith's enchanted spectator. Here, a quip at the Frankfurt School for failing to recognize Weber's *Grundriss der Sozialökonomik* as an anticipation of Marx's 'humanist' *Grundrisse* finds a place along with some surprising praise for Habermas for restoring Weber's legacy for critical theory (295-99).

Once put together again, Weber appears in a new light, as a sort of last man of the Enlightenment. Its debt to religious sectarianism, like Weber's, was far greater than its purported radicalism or liberalism. Religion, Ghosh says definitively, underpinned not only Weber's economic but also his political thought, visible in notions such as the 'vocational' character of modern Western politics, which he opposed to the political ideas of the East embodied by figures like Lenin. The key point was that modern capitalism evolved from the *least* rational of the Protestant traditions, but produced the most rational political institution in the form of the state. In the crowning section on this motif, titled

'From the Sects to the City', Ghosh reveals the fundamental link between sectarian and bourgeois identity underlying capitalist modernity. One passage that surprised me in this context features Ghosh in polite disagreement with the editors of the *Max-Weber-Gesamtausgabe* concerning the Russian influences on his thought. In dismissing the influence of Tolstoy (pp. 291-93), it struck me that we might risk neglecting Weber's interest in Russian sectarianism, a theme he examined in connection with the 1905 revolution.[1]

If Max Weber is the 'most prestigious' of modern Western European thinkers, Ghosh also insists that his celebrity has made us unable to distinguish the gems of his thought (such as his studies of sectarianism) from vulgar bijouterie (such as his definition of the state in *Politics as a Vocation* (p. 338)). An ingrained tendency to 'add ever fresh layers to an original composition' makes it an arduous task to 'lay bare the intellectual life of Max Weber' (p. 147). But the result is an awe-inspiring exercise in intellectual history, which masterfully avoids what Quentin Skinner has once called the 'fallacy of coherence'.[2]

Most of the chips that fly come from the work of those who preferred to think of *Economy and Society* as a new magnum opus which we are left to complete, mirroring Marianne Weber's desire to tidy Weber's desk (p. 8n25). Such criticism is directed at Reinhard Bendix and Wolfgang Schluchter, along with the older Talcott Parsons and Guenther Roth. Whichever middleman or widow you want to blame for having tidied up *your* Weber, Ghosh should now be the first point of call for arranging a new encounter with the man himself.

[1] On Weber's sources, see Karl Konrad, *Die russischen Sekten* (Leipzig, 1907), as discussed in Weber to Karl Bücher, 1 February 1909, MWG II:6, 46. More on this theme in the context of the revolution of 1917, see Aleksandr Etkind, *Khlyst. Sekty, literatura i revoliutsiia* (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 1998), 631–74; and Kathy Rousselet, 'Utopies socio-religieuses et révolution politique dans les années 1920,' *Revue des études slaves*, 69: 1–2 (1997), 257–72.

[2] First articulated in Quentin Skinner, 'Meaning and understanding in the history of ideas', in idem, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, vol. 1 (Cambridge, 2002), 57-89.